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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT OF SECRETARY OF DEFENSE GATES

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer
Reason: 1.4 (b,d)

Introduction

1. (C) Your visit follows President Uribe's May and June visits to Washington. Uribe fears unsubstantiated claims that he and his family were tied to the paramilitaries are undermining prospects in the U.S. Congress for continued high aid levels and ratification of the bilateral Free Trade Agreement (CTPA). He needs substantial U.S aid and the CTPA to help him finish the fight against narcoterrorism and to manage a complex domestic and regional climate. Uribe supports our efforts to locate and rescue the three U.S. hostages held by the FARC, and recently released a FARC leader to try to spur talks on a humanitarian exchange. He remains popular with the Colombian public, but faces challenges in blocking the rise of new criminal groups, addressing human rights concerns, and maintaining governability while supporting the investigation of links between former paramilitaries and members of Colombia's political, military, and economic elites. He maintains an uneasy, yet cordial, relationship with Venezuelan President Chavez, and is trying to maintain a dialogue with Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa. Key issues:

- U.S. Support for Plan Colombia
- U.S. Hostages
- Free Trade
- Paramilitary Investigations
- Drug Eradication and Narcotrafficking
- Colombia's Regional Influence
- Extradition
- Human Rights
- New Criminal Groups and Reintegration
- FARC and ELN

U.S. Support for Plan Colombia

12. (C) U.S. assistance is key to help Colombia defeat narcotics trafficking and terrorism. Without security, economic and social goals cannot be achieved. The GOC's proposal for Plan Colombia's next phase continues efforts to establish control throughout the national territory, but it also substantially boosts resources for education, health, Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, and development. The U.S. Congress is considering cuts in U.S. aid as well as shifting resources from security assistance to social and justice programs. Security cuts would mainly affect counterdrug spray programs and Colombian Army mobility and logistics. Some military and counternarcotics programs may be assumed by the GOC, but this would likely require offsetting cuts in social programs. Uribe fears Colombian Congressional debates on paramilitary ties to politicians have harmed prospects for U.S. ratification of Plan Colombia and CTPA. Opposition Senator Petro has also made unsubstantiated claims linking President Uribe to paramilitaries. We have no evidence tying Uribe to paramilitaries.

U.S. Hostages

13. (C) The FARC has held three Americans for more than four years, with the April 28 escape of a Colombian policeman providing our first credible proof of life since 2003. The GOC supports our efforts to locate and rescue the Americans. Uribe has committed, publicly and privately, to ensuring the three Americans are included in any humanitarian exchange. In June, Uribe unilaterally released about 200 FARC members, as well as a senior FARC official, to press the FARC to release its hostages. Still, the FARC continues to insist the GOC demilitarize a large area before starting talks and to link the freeing of the three Americans to the U.S. release of extradited FARC leaders "Sonia" and "Simon Trinidad." With GOC support, France, Spain and Switzerland are active in efforts to initiate talks on an exchange, but have made little progress due to FARC intransigence. On June 28 the FARC announced the deaths of 11 Colombian state legislators held for over five years. The FARC alleged the deaths occurred in a crossfire during clashes with an "unidentified military group." The GOC denies any military operations occurred on that date.

Free Trade

14. (C) The Colombian Congress ratified the CTPA in June, but it still needs to be reviewed by Colombia's Constitutional Court before becoming law. Uribe considers ratification essential for Colombia to attract long-term investment, increase economic growth, create jobs, and boost government revenues needed to fund social spending. Uribe is concerned about possible U.S. Congressional rejection of the Colombia accord, and also fears Colombia being left behind if agreements with Peru and Panama are approved. Failure to approve the CTPA would be a major political blow to Uribe domestically and internationally. It would boost Venezuelan President Chavez' alternative ALBA and convince many that the USG does not deliver for its closest allies. The U.S. Congress extended trade preferences for Colombian exporters under the Andean Product Tariffs and Drug Eradication Act (APTDEA) through February 2008.

Paramilitary Investigations

15. (C) Uribe's democratic security policy and the paramilitary demobilization have created the space needed for Colombia's institutions -- the Courts, National Prosecutor, and media -- to expose ties between the paramilitaries and members of Colombia's political elite. Arrests to date include 13 Congressmen and two governors, with 12 mayors under investigation. The former head of the GOC intelligence

service, who was a close Uribe ally, was jailed for links to paramilitary crimes, but released on a technicality. A colonel has been removed from duty; the impact on the military is expected to widen with more testimony from ex-paras. Uribe strongly supports the investigations, though most of those implicated to date are members of his coalition. Despite the scandal, Colombia's Congress continues to pass key legislation such as the CPTA.

Drug Eradication and Narcotrafficking

16. (C) Uribe is committed to fighting narcotrafficking, but he is frustrated that record aerial and manual eradication numbers do not appear to be reducing coca crops. The CIA recently released its annual Colombia coca cultivation estimate, showing an increase from 2005. Critics cited the CNC statistic to claim aerial spraying of herbicide does not work. Interagency post-spray verifications show glyphosate kills sprayed coca at rates approaching 90 percent, but high replant rates show the illicit industry's resilience. In contrast, the U.N. cultivation estimate shows a decrease of almost 10 percent compared to its previous estimate. Uribe is concerned about the competing numbers since the GOC uses the U.N. figure as its official estimate. Uribe will ask for greater U.S. resources to end narcotrafficking. We are planning to give him less.

Colombia's Regional Influence

17. (C) Uribe is working with Peru, Chile, Mexico, Canada, and Caribbean and Central American countries to strengthen regional economic and security cooperation. He envisions a Pacific Coast bloc of like-minded democracies linked through interlocking free trade agreements and committed to greater integration and security cooperation that would be a de facto alternative to Chavez's Bolivarian model. Colombia's close commercial ties and shared border with Venezuela lead Uribe to maintain cordial relations with President Chavez despite sharp ideological differences, but he vigorously defends Colombia's security and commercial interests. Uribe is reaching out to Ecuador's Rafael Correa, but he fears Correa's unpredictable nature and close ties to Chavez. Uribe maintains good relations with other neighbors, but Panama opposes a Colombian plan to extend the Pan-American highway through the Darien Gap.

Extradition

18. (C) Colombia is the best U.S. partner in the world on extraditions, with over 450 traffickers and terrorists sent to the U.S. since Uribe took office in 2002. Uribe has suspended the extradition of five narcotraffickers due to their participation in the paramilitary demobilization process. Human rights groups argue several paramilitaries have violated the terms of the demobilization process and should be extradited. The GOC has not made such a determination, preferring to keep the paramilitaries in the Justice and Peace Law Process for now.

Human Rights

19. (C) Colombia's human rights record is improving, but progress in the prosecution of major human rights violators remains slow. The recent UN High Commission on Human Rights' annual report on Colombia recognized advances, but flagged an increase in extrajudicial killings by the military. We are helping Colombia transition from its antiquated inquisitorial system to an accusatorial system -- a process that now covers 75 percent of the population -- and this will help make progress in recent human rights cases. A

proposed reform of the military criminal justice system will also help. We are working with the GOC to achieve justice and reparations in the paramilitary process, as well as to strengthen protection programs for victims and witnesses. We also support a special prosecutorial team set up to investigate crimes against union members.

New Criminal Groups and Reintegration of the Demobilized

¶10. (C) The rise of new criminal groups in areas previously controlled by the paramilitaries is a problem. The new groups lack the national structure and political ambitions of the defunct United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), and the GOC has set up police stations in rural areas -- as well as joint police-military task forces -- to combat them. We support GOC efforts to reintegrate 32,000 former paramilitaries into civilian life, but these efforts are hampered by the magnitude of the problem and insufficient resources. The lag in effective reintegration programs and the easy money of narcotrafficking and extortion have led a small number of ex-paramilitaries to return to crime.

FARC and ELN

¶11. (C) Increased Colombian military presence and operations have put pressure on the FARC, but they have not forced the group to enter serious peace negotiations. On a defensive footing, the FARC has largely withdrawn to more remote regions and moves in small units -- avoiding direct engagement and using explosives and land mines to ambush security forces. Narcotics trafficking remains its chief financing source. The GOC continues peace talks in Havana with the ELN, a smaller left-wing terrorist group, and some kind of cease-fire could come in July.
Drucker